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ABSTRACT

An adult learner task force at a small liberal arts college conducted a telephone survey of a random stratified sample of approximately 40 recent graduates from 3 college programs to identify factors perceived as contributing to the graduates' academic success. Additionally, a focus group was convened to assess faculty perceptions of institutional support necessary to enhance the teaching of adults. The following were identified as critical dimensions of why students are drawn to college and why they succeed: availability of specific programs; high quality/caliber of program, faculty, and instruction; and small class size and caring atmosphere. Access to adequate resources (libraries, advisement, and academic support services) and timely communication of information regarding availability of resources, events, and program requirements were seen as essential to student satisfaction/success. Faculty were aware of the unique needs of adult learners in their classes and had strong opinions regarding provision of adequate support for successful instruction of adult learners. Among the study recommendations were the following: multiple and flexible class-scheduling patterns; course loads/class sizes small enough to enable faculty to nurture/support students, individualize instruction/advisement, and form strong relationships with students; expanded support services; and more attention directed toward the college-to-postgraduate transition. (MN)

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Adult Learners: Why Were They Successful? Lessons Learned Via An Adult Learner Task Force

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Abstract

Changing regional economic factors have stimulated an expanding need for additional education for new careers. Increased adult enrollments and continued low numbers of high school graduates are causing colleges and universities to reconsider the type and level of support provided to adult learners as major consumers of higher education. With this increasing enrollment of adults, there is a need to examine those factors that serve to attract, retain, and result in successful graduation.

A study was conducted via an Adult Learner Task Force at a small, liberal arts college in New England involving a telephone survey of a random, stratified sampling of some forty recent graduates from three educational programs: the undergraduate Women's College, the Weekend College and the Graduate School. Additionally, a focus group was convened to assess faculty perceptions of institutional support necessary to enhance the teaching of adult learners.

Graduates cited faculty as most important in their success in obtaining their degree, noting that faculty was the major way in which the college contributed to their success. Relatedly, in the forum, faculty confirmed their sensitivity to the needs of the adult learners in their classrooms and their conscious efforts to support adults in a variety of ways.

It was noted by the graduates that the college could improve support for adult learners. Suggestions clustered in the areas of commuter communication, advisement, and library resources, hours, and orientation programs. There was not a high response rate or commonality of response relative to aspects inhibiting student success in obtaining their degree.

Data further revealed that the primary reasons students selected this institution were: the type of program curriculum available, prior experience with the college, convenient location, and the quality reputation of programs or departments. When asked if the reasons for selecting the college were justified based on their experience, responses were overwhelmingly positive. The quality of the program, faculty, and instruction were the primary reasons cited as the way that the college met their expectations.

Additional findings of this study related to the varied responses regarding the presence of adult learner needs and how the college supported those needs. Several conclusions were drawn about why students are attracted to the college and why they succeed. Specific recommendations based on the findings are presented as they were submitted to the College administration. Finally, some remarks are offered regarding the College's response to the recommendations and on-going recognition of the needs of adult learners.

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Background

Saint Joseph College, located on an eighty-acre, picturesque New England campus, is composed of three academic units which, as of the fall of 1993, serve two thousand undergraduate and graduate students. These units include: The Women's College, Connecticut's only four-year college for women, The Weekend College, for adult men and women, and the co-educational Graduate School.

Saint Joseph College(SJC) was founded in the 1930's by the Sisters of Mercy to provide women the opportunity to attend college and prepare for careers. The curriculum reflects the founders' commitment to professional education with a strong liberal arts core. Today, the majority of SJC undergraduate students elect majors in pre-professional programs such as nursing, child study, education, social work, or business. Course requirements for studies in the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and mathematics remain a central and substantial part of the undergraduate curriculum in both the Women's College and the Weekend College. Graduate programs are focused in nursing, education, gerontology, and counseling.

The commitment to women's education continues today through the Women's College. Many of the women enrolled are first-generation college students who have been long-time Connecticut residents. However, in recognition of changing demographics and student needs in higher education, the Weekend College was formed in 1985 to provide a means for adult men and women to pursue a Baccalaureate Degree on a part-time basis while maintaining full-time employment.

Today over half of the total student population at SJC is over the age of twenty-four; approximately one-quarter of the enrollees in the Women's College are over the age of twenty-four. This experience is consistent with both national and regional trends (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1993).

Nationally the number of adult students enrolled in higher education has increased from 4.9 million in 1984 to 6.6 million in 1992, an effective increase of thirty-four percent (*Digest of Educational Statistics*, 1993). This demographic trend has been amplified in Connecticut by the persistent recession. Connecticut benefited from the rise of high technology, defense, insurance, real estate, and banking industries during the 1980's. Today, we in Connecticut suffer the consequences of these gains with high housing costs, high labor costs, a glutted commercial and residential real estate market, high unemployment, a banking industry which still carries the weight of multiple foreclosures, and the loss of many of our traditional manufacturing industries.

Population estimates released in the U.S. Census Bureau March 15, 1994 Report indicate that Connecticut's population of eighteen to twenty-four year olds has declined by 16.3% during the early 1900's (*Hartford Courant*, 1994). This decline was the largest reported for any state for this age group. Experts cite the lowered birth rate, the recession and the high cost of living as causative factors:

> Increasingly, economists say, young people are looking at the relatively high cost of housing in Connecticut, at a job market compressed by the recession, and are seeking their fortunes elsewhere.
> (*Hartford Courant*, 1994, p. 1)

This situation has resulted in a relative lack of young adults. It is being felt as a smaller pool of applicants to all the state's colleges and universities. Our enrollments reflect both women entering college after raising children and more adults seeking retraining and pursuing Baccalaureate degrees to advance their careers. Costs, at our college and elsewhere, have increased so that many of our students can only afford part-time enrollment while simultaneously working. Undoubtedly, the older student has become an important part of our student population.

In fact, between 1980 and 1990 the enrollments of SJC students under the age of twenty-five increased by only 2% while enrollments of persons twenty-five and older rose by 32% (Saint Joseph College, 1994). Part-time status is now common and the Weekend College and the Graduate School have become the focus of increased attention.

Administrative awareness of the importance of the adult segment of the student population led the Provost to form the Task Force on Adult Education in the spring of 1992. This task force was comprised of approximately ten people, each with strong personal opinions and representative of the varied interests and concerns of and about adult learners in the three units of the College. The membership perceived the immediate importance of gathering information to inform its decision-making and formulate recommendations. The following is a description of one of the Task Force's initiatives: a study focusing on the perceptions of recent graduates.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine a) graduates' perceptions relative to what facilitated their continued enrollment and ultimate success in graduating, b) their perceptions of adult learner needs and ways the college supported those needs, and c) how the college could improve its supportive efforts. The study consisted of a semi-structured telephone survey and a focus group designated as a 'faculty forum.'

Student Interviews

A semi-structured telephone interview survey was developed, piloted and modified based on initial use. Interviews using the final version of the survey were carried out over a two-month period with a random sampling of thirty-nine of the 1992 adult graduates representing the three constituent groups: the Women's College(WOC), the Weekend College(WEC) and the Graduate School(GS). For purposes of the study, 'adult' was defined as those students who commenced study for their degree at the age of twenty-four or older. The following table delineates the number of interview participants, the unit from which they graduated, and the percentage of respondents in each unit relative to the total number of graduates:

Unit	interviewed	graduates	% of graduates
Women's College	10	37	27%
Weekend College	10	29	34%
Graduate School	19	121	16%

The interview survey consisted of ten questions:

1. What were the main reasons that you selected SJC to pursue your degree?
2. Did you find these reasons to be justified; in what way did SJC live up to your expectations?
3. a)You were successful in obtaining your degree from SJC. What do you think was most important to your being successful?
   b)What else contributed to your success?
4. a)What aspects inhibited you in being successful in obtaining your degree?
   b)How significant was this in inhibiting your success?
5. If you haven't already addressed this, in what ways did the college contribute to your success?
6. In what ways could the college have assisted you more?
7. a)As an adult learner pursuing a degree, do you think you had special needs? If so, what were they?
   b)In what ways were those needs met?
   c)In what ways were your needs as an adult learner not met?
8. The college is very interested in modifying to meet the needs of students. What else could the college do to meet the needs of adult students?
9. Would you recommend SJC to others (Why or why not?)
10. Are there further comments you would like to make regarding your experience at SJC?

Faculty Forum

Additionally, a faculty forum was convened to assess faculty perceptions of institutional support necessary to enhance the teaching of adult learners. Volunteers were solicited at a meeting of the Faculty Committee of the Whole. Specifically, the Task Force requested faculty volunteers, experienced in teaching in all three of the College units (WFC< WOC, GS) for "Adult Learner Task Force representatives" from each of the five divisions in the college (education, social sciences, natural sciences, nursing, humanities). The three-hour focus group was facilitated by one of the co-chairs of the Task Force and was directed around the following questions:

1. Do you think adult learners have special needs as college students? If so, what do you perceive those needs to be?

2. What challenges do adult learners present to faculty?

3. What resources do faculty need to enhance their teaching of adult learners? What institutional support would be helpful?

4. What opportunities should be made available for faculty to share information about styles, strategies and techniques they have found successful in promoting the academic success of adult learners?

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Findings

Findings of both the phone interviews and the focus group are reported below.

Student Interviews

Review of the students' responses reveals that the primary reasons students select SJC are: the type of program or curriculum available (most strongly noted by graduate students), prior experience with SJC (either first-hand or via family member or friend), the convenient location, and the quality reputation of programs or departments. To a lesser degree, students noted the importance of the smallness of the college and classes and the warm, receptive, caring, friendly community. Of particular note is that students enrolled in the WEC strongly stated that the WEC schedule was of significance in their selection of SJC.

When asked if these reasons for selecting SJC were justified based on their experience at SJC, students' responses were overwhelmingly positive. The quality of the program, faculty, and instruction were the primary reasons cited as the way that the college met their expectations. Small classes and general support were also noted.

Students cited faculty as most important in their success in obtaining their degree. They noted to a lesser level the import of their own effort and the support of family and the college in general.

Similarly, students strongly noted that the faculty was the major way in which the college contributed to their success. Quality of programs, smallness of classes and the general atmosphere of the college were also noted.

There was not a high response rate or commonality of response relative to aspects inhibiting student success in obtaining their degree at SJC. For those students who *did* note inhibiting factors, responses appeared to be idiosyncratic and clustered in the areas of advisement, handling of multiple roles, library resources, and the bookstore. Students did not indicate that these factors were significant in inhibiting their success.

Response to the question of ways in which the college could assist more were scattered, clustering in the areas of commuter communication, advisement, and library resources, hours, and orientation programs.

Students in the Women's College and the Weekend College indicated that they had adult learner needs, although their follow-up answers were rather sketchy leading one to wonder how they conceptualized an "adult learner." Multiple role demands with related issues of time and stress were noted by several participants. Weekend College students indicated needs related to support and development of basic skills (e.g. writing, math, library skills orientation, computers, ARC support). Flexibility and scheduling were mentioned by several students from each constituency group but more frequently by graduate students.

The responses from Weekend College and Women's College students indicated that the students believe that adult learners *do* have special needs as

described above. However, responses were more mixed from graduate students. Half of the nineteen respondents from the Graduate School indicated that they *did not* have special needs as an adult learner.

Students did not note any particular way that adult learner needs were met at SJC. However, there appear to be two ways in which their responses clustered relative to the question, "In what ways were those needs not met?" The only specific response common to each constituency group was that communication with commuters and part time students was less effective than needed. Several students noted issues with course scheduling and availability, while several others cited concerns relative to their efficient use of time such as bookstore hours, library hours and duplication of copies.

Few graduate students had any response when asked, "What else could the college do to meet the needs of adult learners?" Of those who responded, most said, "Nothing." There were a few who noted that the college could attend to some scheduling/course availability issues and ways to reduce cost of enrollment. "Greater course selection" was the response of a few Weekend College students, but otherwise there did not seem to be any commonality of response from these students. When compared to the other groups, the Women's College students had even fewer suggestions, with minor note of schedule issues and communication with commuters.

All thirty-nine students responded that they have or would recommend SJC to others. Weekend College students did not elaborate beyond this. Some Women's College students and Graduate School students noted the collaborative environment and community spirit. Graduate students spoke of the smallness of classes, high quality of teaching and programs, and positive relationships with professors. A common note among all students was the citation of quality programs.

Faculty Forum

Discussion in the forum focused on the multiple role demands of the students (home, family, student). Faculty also indicated that adult students held high expectations of themselves as students and also of the faculty as instructors. The faculty emphasized the adult learners' desire to share their expertise and life experiences with others. Through class dialogue and written assignments, adults were perceived as having a strong need to connect learning with their life experiences. In the classroom, the adult students were reported as most satisfied in small, interactive classes in which community was promoted.

The faculty noted that they often met adult learner needs by meeting the tenor of the group and through modification of instruction in terms of students' need for dialogue and examples. They felt that two areas were of major importance in meeting the on-going needs of adults throughout the semester. Providing choice of assignments was important so that the students could take some control and self-directedness in the course so as to modify to meet their own individual needs and interests. Faculty also noted the need to be understanding of the multiple demands on their students and the need to be flexible in the due dates and acceptance of assignments.

The faculty indicated that they often felt that the classroom facilities were not conducive to adult needs in that there were on-going issues with comfortable seating, ventilation and temperature. They voiced concern that various offices on campus were only open to meet the needs of full-time, residential students and that there needed to be more hours at the library, computing center, bookstore, tutoring center, registration office and financial aid office. There was in-depth discussion of the need for a variety of scheduling options for adult students, focusing on Friday-Saturday intensive session hours in addition to evening and Weekend College regular session hours.

Conclusions

Based on review of the information gathered via the faculty forum and the phone interviews, several conclusions were drawn. These are delineated below, followed by some additional observations.

1. Critical dimensions of why students are drawn to the college and why they succeed are: a)availability of specific programs, b)the high quality of these programs, c)the high caliber of faculty and instruction, d)the smallness of classes and the caring atmosphere of the college.

2. Faculty are perceived by graduates as highly professional, up-to-date, accessible and caring.

3. Seen as essential to student satisfaction and success are: a)access to adequate resources (including library resources hours, advisement and academic support services), and b)timely communication of information (re: availability of resources, events, program requirements).

4) Faculty are aware of the unique needs of adult learners in their classes and have strong opinions regarding the provision of adequate support for the successful instruction of these students. They perceive that issues of faculty resources, course load assignment, advisement capacity, support service accessibility, flexible scheduling options, and classroom facilities equipment that are conducive to adult learner needs should receive attention.

Two additional areas warrant note. Generally, the responses of adult learners in the Weekend College, the Women's College and the Graduate School were more similar than dissimilar. Secondly, noteworthy by their absence of citation as factors that either served to attract students to the college, contributed to students' success or inhibited their success were: social opportunities programs, access to child care, and the Catholic tradition of the college.

Recommendations

Based on review of the findings, several recommendations were formulated and put forth by the Task Force:

1) Maintain and consider increasing multiple scheduling patterns of classes (e.g. day, late afternoon, weekend, intensive session) to provide for student needs.

2) Provide support to faculty in carrying out their roles at a quality level. They must be provided with the professional development opportunities and resources to continue to develop and implement high quality programs and courses to maintain the reputation valued so by college alumni.

3) Provide faculty with course loads that ensure capacity for nurturance and support of students, individualized attention via instruction and advisement, and strong, positive relationships with students.

4) Maintain and consider increasing the number of courses with small class enrollments.

5) Provide multiple sessions of courses to allow for flexible scheduling both from a short-term (times of day and week) and long-term (multiple-year) perspective.

6) Maintain and expand support services to students relative to book-store hours, library resources hours, academic resource center services, development of information literacy skills (e.g. library research, computer skills, communication skills) and advisement.

7) Give consideration to communication mechanisms to provide timely information to students and to assist them in transition from the college to post-graduate opportunities.

8) Consider further steps toward understanding and supporting the needs of adult learners at SJC: a)survey faculty regarding issues relative to teaching adult learners, b)continue a survey of graduates at least every two years and maintain adequate student records for the efficient implementation of the survey c)expand the current WEC advisory group to include adult learners from the Women's College and the Graduate School.

On-Going Efforts

As time goes on, the impact of the Adult Learner Task Force and the recognition and implementation of its recommendations may be understood more clearly. To date, several advances are recognized.

Some positive outcomes regarding access to adequate resources and timely communication have been observed. Specifically, the bookstore hours have been expanded to include more evening and Saturday hours and a number of other academic support services are being reviewed, expanded and/or refined to respond more effectively to the needs of the adult learners in the Women's College, the Weekend College, and the Graduate School. These support services, in particular, include the Academic Resource Center, the library, the writing portfolio review program (now to include WEC students), and advisement.

Regarding communication, administration, staff and faculty are becoming more aware of the need for better communication with adult learners and appear responsive to recommendations made by the Adult Learner Task Force and other concerned groups. An example of responsiveness and progress in this area is reflected in a newly-formed group in the WEC. The staff, students and faculty have formed a student/alumnae advisory committee which, through monthly meetings, has improved the WEC newsletter and compiled a comprehensive student handbook.

While the Provost's Adult Learner Task Force has been disbanded, its worth is recognized as it has evolved into a sub-committee of the Enrollment Management Committee, a standing committee of the President's Cabinet. The College is continuing in its efforts toward meeting adult learner needs as evidenced in its exploration of modified library hours and course scheduling (including an intensive 'Weekender Special') and restructuring of advisement services. Clearly, the needs of the adult learner are recognized on the SJC campus.

Citations

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